

towards others as you would wish them to behave towards you is only possible for a man, free from those fables which priests offer to him as the only truth, and not bound with other people by promises to behave as he is commanded. Only then will a man be in a condition to fulfil not his own will or other people's but the will of God.

The will of God is not that we should conquer and oppress the weak, but that we should acknowledge all men as brothers and serve one another.

These then are the thoughts that your letter has aroused in me. I shall be very glad if they clarify the questions occupying you.

1899

This new translation has been made from the Russian text of the Jubilee Edition of the Collected Works of Leo Tolstoy, Moscow, vol. 90, 1958, pages 54-59.

Hand Set in 10 pt. Baskerville, printed and published, by M. S. Robinson and R. V. Sampson at 38, Canynge Square, Bristol 8.

LETTER TO A SERGEANT

by
LEO TOLSTOY

In reply to a letter of 18th, December 1898 from Sergeant Michael Shalaginov (retired) asking whether Christian teaching is compatible with military service and war.

Bristol 1969

INTRODUCTION

In this short essay, written with his customary clarity and devastating logic, Tolstoy attempts to answer the question: how is it possible for men to make war on one another? He reminds us that this slaughter of our fellow creatures, to which we have become accustomed, is not only a dreadful thing but also an extraordinary thing, which cries out for explanation.

His answer is very simple. It is possible for men to kill one another, to act in flagrant violation of the demands of conscience, only if they are conditioned from the earliest years by false religious teaching. To propagate this false teaching is, according to Tolstoy, the function of the churches, with the blessing and support of the governments.

The specific idolatry and superstitions attacked by Tolstoy in this essay, enjoy today very much less credence among most sections of the population and certainly among the educated, yet the governments still find no difficulty in recruiting their armies and manufacturing their munitions. Nevertheless, Tolstoy was not in error - he was right to isolate false religious teaching as a basic reason for the continuance of wars, which become more and more destructive.

The prevailing "religion" among the educated today goes under the names of positivism, pragmatism or humanism. In communist countries it is called Marxism or dialectical materialism, but so far as concerns this fundamental issue of life (and death) the "religious" teaching is identical. That teaching is this: that while in general it is wrong to kill people it is

justified when the government orders it to be done in "self-defence". In other words, according to this teaching, a man is given no reason, that is absolutely binding upon him, why it is always wrong to take human life and indeed do violence of any kind one to another. And so none of the governments ever experience any difficulty, now as in Tolstoy's day, in obtaining all the armed men necessary to their purposes; and wars thus inevitably continue to occur.

As Tolstoy says, the clearest and most moving statement, impossible to misunderstand, of the correct religious reasons why it is wrong to kill, why it is wrong to RESIST evil, is contained in the conversation and life of Jesus Christ, known to each one of us. Unfortunately, this true teaching, which is taught in our schools and churches, is mixed up with a great deal of false and superstitious teaching, examples of which are given by Tolstoy.

The consequence of this is that while people do "believe" the true teaching, we only "believe" it in the way that we believe those things which are confused in our minds or mixed up with other things that we know or suspect to be false, that is to say, we believe weakly and without conviction. Consequently, when the positivists, the humanists, that is, the contemporary intellectual apologists for the rich and powerful classes, assure us that we can only confidently believe in scientific "facts" and that all "values" are in contrast merely subjective, that is to say, merely OUR opinion, we fall readily into the trap that has been designed for us.

The true belief that it is the will of God that we should love our neighbour as ourselves and never under any circumstances subject him to violence, still lets kill him, is transmuted into MERELY my or your opinion, which very naturally and easily yields to the contrary opinion of the government, which unlike your or my opinion, is backed by violent and terrifying sanctions.

That is why it is very important and very urgent, if we wish to prevent the unimaginable horrors of the future war that now hangs over us all, that we should each one of us exert ourselves to clarify our own minds and try to ensure that our children are not subjected to self-evident nonsense and superstition, which has the effect of permanently weakening the clarity of their conviction that it is at all times their prime task in this world to love one another.

R.V.S.

1968

LETTER TO A SERGEANT

by

LEO TOLSTOY

You are surprised that soldiers are taught that in certain cases and in war it is permissible to kill, whereas, in the Scriptures which are acknowledged as sacred by those who teach this, there is nothing resembling such an authorisation, but there is the opposite: not only is all killing of people forbidden, but also all abuse of other people; it is forbidden to do to others what you would not want done to you. You ask: "Is this not deceit, and if this is deceit, for whose benefit is it done?"

Yes, this is deceit, done for the benefit of those who are accustomed to live on the sweat and blood of other people and who for their own purposes have perverted and do pervert the teaching of Christ, given to people for their good but now, in its perverted state, become a main source of all the ills of mankind.

It has come about in this fashion.

For the government and all those people of the upper classes, who side with the government and live on the labour of others, it is necessary to have a means of power over the working people; the means for this is the army. Defence against external enemies is only an excuse. The German government frightens its people with the Russians and the French, the French frightens its people with the Germans, the

Russian government frightens its with the French and the Germans and thus do all the governments. But the Germans, the Russians, the French not only do not want to go to war with their neighbours and other peoples, but, living with them in peace, fear war worse than anything in the world. The governments and the idle upper classes, in order to have an excuse for their power over the working people, behave like the gypsy who whips his horse round the corner and then pretends that he cannot hold it back. They excite their own people and another government, and then pretend that for the good or for the defence of their people they cannot not declare war, which once again occurs to the advantage only of the generals, officers, officials, merchants and the rich classes in general. In reality wars are only the inevitable consequence of the existence of troops: the troops themselves are necessary to the governments only as a means of power over their working people.

This is a criminal business, but worst of all is the fact that governments, in order to have a reasonable basis for their power over the peoples, have had to pretend that they are fulfilling the highest religious teaching known to men, that is, the Christian, and in that teaching educate their subjects. This teaching, in its essence, is contrary not only to killing but to all violence as well, and therefore for governments to exercise power over peoples also considering themselves Christians, it was necessary to pervert Christianity and conceal its true meaning from the people and deprive men of that good which Christ brought them.

This perversion of Christianity was carried out long ago, still in the time of the Emperor Constantine, the scoundrel who was canonized on this account. All subsequent governments, especially ours, try with all their might to maintain this perversion and not allow the people to see the true meaning of Christianity, because, seeing the true meaning of

Christianity, the people would understand that governments with their taxes, soldiers, gaols, gallows, and priests who deceive are not only not the pillars of Christianity, as they themselves make out, but the greatest enemies of it.

In consequence of this perversion there are also produced those deceptions which have struck you, and all those terrible evils, from which the people suffer.

The people are crushed, robbed, poverty - stricken, ignorant, desolate. Why? Because the land is in the hands of the rich, the people enslaved in factories, works, by wages, because taxes are taken from the worker, the value of his work is reduced, and the cost of what is necessary to him is driven up. How is it possible to escape from this? Take the land from the rich? But if this is done, the soldiers will come, kill the rebels and put them in prison. Take the factories, the works? It will be the same. Hold a strike? But this will never succeed. The rich will hold out longer than the workers, the troops will always be on the side of the capitalists. The people will never extricate itself from that poverty in which they are kept so long as the troops are in the power of the ruling classes.

But who are these troops who hold the people thus in thrall? Who are these soldiers who will shoot at peasants, taking possession of the land, and at strikers, if they do not disperse, and at smugglers bringing in goods duty - free — who will put in prison and keep there those who refuse to pay? The soldiers are those very peasants, from whom the land was taken away, those very strikers, who want to raise their wages, those very tax - payers who want to free themselves from their payments.

Why then do these people shoot on their brothers? Because it has been instilled into them that that oath, which they were compelled to take on entering the service, is binding upon them, and that, while generally speaking, it is forbidden

to kill people, it is permissible at the command of the authorities, — that is, there is worked on them that self-same deception which has struck you. But the question then arises: by what means can sensible people, often literate and even educated, believe such transparent falsehood? However little education a man may have had, he still cannot fail to know that Christ, in whose name they teach him to kill, not only forbade killing, but taught gentleness, humbleness, forgiveness of injuries, love for enemies; he cannot avoid seeing that therefore he cannot, on the basis of Christian teaching, pledge himself in advance to kill all those whom he is ordered to.

The question is how can sensible people believe, as have believed and as do believe all now undergoing military service, such obvious deceit? The answer to this question is that people are taken in not by this deception alone, but are prepared from childhood for this goal by a series of deceptions, a whole system of deceptions, which is called the Orthodox faith and which is nothing other than the crudest idolatry. According to this faith, people are instructed that God is a trinity, that besides this trinitarian god, there is a Queen of heaven, and besides this queen, there are in addition various saints, bodies which have not decomposed, and besides saints, ikons of gods and celestial queens, by which it is necessary to place candles and pray with the hands; and that the most important and sacred thing in the world is the mass, which the priest makes with wine and bread behind the partition on Sundays — that afterwards when the priest has whispered over them, the wine will be not wine and the bread not bread but the blood and body of one of the three gods and so forth. All this is so stupid, meaningless that there is not the slightest possibility of understanding what it all means; and surely those who teach this faith, do not command people to understand but command them only to believe; and people brought up to this from childhood believe in any nonsense that

they are told. When the people are so stupefied that they believe that God hangs in the corner or dwells in the wafer at mass which the priest gives them on a spoon, that to kiss a board or saint's relics and place candles by them is useful both for this life and for the future, then when the authorities summon them to military service, there they deceive them as they want, assuring them that according to the law of Christ you may kill, and forcing them first to swear on the Gospels (in which it is forbidden to swear), that they will do that very thing that is forbidden in those Gospels, and then teaching them that to kill people at the order of the authorities is not a sin, but that it is a sin not to obey the authorities and so forth.

So that the deception of the soldiers, consisting in the fact that it is instilled into them that one may without sin kill people at the command of the authorities, does not stand apart, but is connected with a whole system of deceptions, without which this deception would be ineffective.

Only a man who is quite stupefied by that false, so-called Orthodox Faith, which is presented to him as the Christian, can believe that for a Christian there is no sin in entering on military service, promising to obey blindly every man who is considered a superior officer, and under the will of another man to be instructed in killing, and then to commit that crime most dreadfully prohibited by all laws.

A man, free from the deceit of the so-called orthodox false Christian faith, will never believe this.

Hence it comes about that so-called sects, that is, Christians, rejecting the teaching of Orthodoxy and acknowledging the teaching of Christ, as it was stated in the Gospels and especially in the Sermon on the Mount, never fall into that deception, and have always refused and do refuse to be soldiers, acknowledging it to be incompatible with Christianity and preferring to bear every kind of torture, as hundreds and thousands of people now do in Russia (Dukhobors, Molokans),

in Austria (Nazarenes), in Sweden, Switzerland and Germany (Evangelicals). The government knows this and therefore watches them with such fear and attention as it does in order that the general deceit of the church, without which its power would be impossible, should be accomplished right from childhood upon all children and be ceaselessly maintained lest a single man should threaten it. Yet the government allows both drunkenness and debauchery (and not only allows but encourages drunkenness and debauchery: this helps stupefaction), but opposes with all its power that which would enable people, by freeing themselves from deceit, to liberate others also.

The Russian government carries out this deception with particular brutality and perfidy. It orders all its subjects, threatening them with punishment if they do not obey, to baptize their children in infancy in the false, so - called Orthodox Faith. When the children have been christened, that is, are considered Orthodox, then on pain of punishment under the penal code they are forbidden to discuss that faith in which without their consent they were christened, and for such discussion of this faith just as for leaving it and transferring to another, they are subjected to punishment. So that it cannot be said of the Russian people that they believe in the Orthodox Faith - they do not know whether they believe or whether they do not believe, because all were converted to this faith when they were infants; they are kept in this faith forcibly thrust on them by fear of punishment. All Russian people, caught in Orthodoxy, are kept in it by insidious deception and cruel violence.

Availing itself of that power which it has, the government propagates and maintains the deception, while the deception maintains its power.

And therefore the one means of delivering men from all their sufferings consists in freeing them from the false faith

instilled into them by the government, and adopting that true Christian teaching, which is concealed by this false teaching. This true Christian teaching is very simple, clear and accessible to all, just as Christ said. But it is simple and accessible only when a man is freed from those lies in which we are all educated and which are presented to us as divine truth.

It is impossible to pour some necessary thing into a vessel which is full of unnecessary things. You must first pour out of it what is unnecessary. It is necessary first to understand that all the tales of how God supposedly created the world 6,000 years ago, and how Adam transgressed, and how the human race fell, and both the son of God and God, being born of a virgin, came into the world and atoned for it, and all the fables of the Bible and the Gospels, and all the lives of the saints and stories of miracles, ikons and relics are essentially nothing other than a crude mixture of the superstitions of the European peoples and the deceptions of the clergy. Only to a man, absolutely freed from these deceptions, can be accessible and intelligible the simple and clear teaching of Christ, which does not require interpretations of any kind, and which it is impossible not to understand.

This teaching does not say anything about the beginning or the end of the world or of God or of his designs, in general of that which we cannot know, and besides is not necessary for us to know, but speaks only of that which it is necessary for a man to do to be saved, that is, to live in the best way from birth to death that life, in which he came into this world. For this it is necessary to behave towards others as we would wish them to behave towards us. In this is the whole law and the prophets, as Christ said.

In order for us to behave like that, we do not need ikons nor relics, nor church services, nor priests, nor histories of the saints, nor catechisms, nor governments, but on the contrary we need absolute freedom from all this, because to behave